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ABSTRACT

Reviewing the community college literature in the ERIC database, this paper examines determinants and studies of institutional and programmatic quality. Following a discussion of the contemporary debate over educational quality and its importance for the community college, determinants of quality are discussed in five categories: (1) measures related to institutional resources, including number of course offerings, faculty characteristics and effectiveness, student characteristics, and financial support; (2) factors related to instructional and management processes, such as faculty evaluation systems, budgeting, educational delivery, and program evaluation; (3) student outcome measures, including follow-up of graduates' success in finding employment or transferring to a four-year institution; (4) value-added approaches to quality, which attempt to document student learning gains; and (5) measures related to curriculum structure and emphasis, including the degree to which general education and the liberal arts are integrated into vocational programs, and the question of academic standards. Next, a number of studies are reviewed exemplifying the use of outcome measures, value-added measures, and a decision-making approach. After noting the relative lack of quantitative research on the quality of community college education, the paper concludes that there is no consensus on the meaning of quality at community colleges and that quality judgements are often made on the basis of subjective rather than empirical observations. (LL)

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HOW IS QUALITY MEASURED AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE?

by James C. Palmer

Introduction

The contemporary debate over educational quality is vitally important to community college professionals for at least three reasons. First, community colleges run the risk of being unfairly judged by a society that measures institutional quality in terms of high selectivity, a a specialized curriculum, research productivity, and other factors uncharacteristic of the two-year college (Priest, 1980). Second, stabilized enrollments and decreased funding have driven home the realization that institutional quality cannot easily be equated with growing numbers of colleges and students (Collins, 1979; Johnson, 1975; Koltai, 1981). Third, there is a need to separate the rhetorical from the factual in discussions about educational quality at community colleges. As ubiquitous buzzwords, "quality" and "excellence" appear in the mottoes of professional associations, in convention themes, and in institutional and system-wide goal statements. Since no one would argue with the desirability of quality and excellence, the words are often used without definition.

In an attempt to better understand what is meant by quality at the two-year college, the writer reviewed the community college materials in the ERIC database that (1) have been indexed with the descriptor "Educational Quality," and/or (2) include the words "quality" or "excellence" in the title. The following paragraphs review the various determinants of quality that are used by authors and the various methodologies designed to measure institutional and program quality.

VC 830 333

The Determinants of Quality

The literature yields five determinants of quality at the community college: institutional resources, instructional and management processes, student outcomes, value-added impact on students, and curricular structure and emphasis. Each of these determinants is discussed below.

Institutional Resources

Though community colleges lose out to four-year colleges and universities in ratings that are based on institutional resources, many community college leaders nonetheless equate resources with quality. These resources include course offerings, faculty, students, and funding.

A respect for larger colleges and larger numbers of course offerings is very evident in the community college literature. Such a focus, for example, is evidenced by Harlacher (1975) who, in reviewing accomplishments at the Metropolitan Community Colleges of Kansas City (MO), notes increased staff remuneration, expansion of educational access through the provision of telecourses, the increased number of courses offered by the colleges, and other growth factors. More recently, Koltai (1981) notes the increased number of occupational courses offered by the Los Angeles Community College District during the late 1970s and maintains that "These numbers indicate our district's commitment to excellence in career preparation" (p. 10). Limited resources notwithstanding, the magnitude of the college enterprise is still a highly regarded quality measure.

Another important resource measure is faculty quality. Ironically, this commodity is measured in two contradictory ways. One method is to compare instructors with faculty at four-year colleges and universities. The second method involves an assessment of the instructor in terms of his or her ability

to function successfully in the pedagogically oriented environment of the two-year college.

Taking the former approach, Vairo (1965) reports the findings of a nationwide survey of underdivision instructors at 24 two- and four-year colleges. He concludes that community college instructors lag behind in terms of highest degree held, collegiate teaching experiences, and memberships in professional organizations and honor societies. Vairo warns that the "prestige of the two-year college must be raised and its image altered, if it is to attract qualified personnel" (pp. 219-220). In another study, Deaver (1973) examines the academic backgrounds of two-year college journalism instructors nationwide. Noting that only 37 percent of the instructors had a journalism degree and that 20 percent had never taken an undergraduate journalism course, Deaver questions their ability to "teach courses that are academically respectable" and that are on a par with journalism courses taught at four-year colleges (p. 2). Both authors represent those who argue that the quality of the community college could be raised if faculty were upgraded á la the university.

O'Banion (1973), Tuttle (1963), and the New Jersey State Board of Education (Excellence and the Open Door..., 1979) take the second approach to measuring faculty quality. All three maintain that there is a direct relationship between institutional quality and the caliber of the faculty. Faculty caliber, in turn, is dependent upon pre-service and in-service training that can assist instructors to become better classroom teachers. O'Banion maintains that all community college faculty members should go through a pre-service program that examines the history and philosophy of the two-year college, student characteristics, and instructional processes. Likewise Tuttle, in her discussion of associate degree nursing programs,

points out the need to train nurse educators for effective participation in the junior college setting. This need is reiterated by the New Jersey Board which notes that vocational and remedial instructors need special pedagogical skills.

A third resource measure is the student body itself. Many writers argue that institutional quality is jeopardized by academically underprepared or disinterested students. Cox (1966), for example, writes that she has had it with "scholastically inept young people." She goes on to ask, "Will they in time, by sheer weight of numbers, force colleges down to their level?" (p. 39). Baker and Thompson (1981) echo these concerns:

> It is clear that institutions which desire to call themselves colleges and to provide clients with college level skills must buffer curriculum programs through remedial education (p. 32).

Such concerns have precipitated the recent and growing interest in the development of community college honors programs. Miami-Dade Community College (FL), for example, operates an "Emphasis on Excellence" program for honors students in an attempt, among other things, "to address the continuing need for high quality programs during the first two years of college" (Emphasis on Excellence ..., 1980, p. 1). Honors programs, which are "springing up on community college campuses across the country," are part of an effort to attract outstanding students and to thus strengthen institutional quality (Transfer, Honors, and Excellence ..., 1982, p. 1).

The last resource measure, funding, has received relatively little attention in the literature on quality at the community college. Philpott (1963) notes the contradiction inherent in the desire of the American public to provide an educational system of the "highest excellence" with only a minimum financial outlay (p. 85). Watson (1980) argues that funding cuts lower the quality of community services programs which have been forced to abandon the arts and other less popular areas for courses that will sell

in the marketplace. Undoubtedly, the number of authors emphasizing funding as a determinant of institutional quality will increase in response to recent budget cuts.

Instructional and Management Processes

Many writers tend to equate institutional processes with quality (Priest 1980). To them quality is dependent upon the way in which colleges organize themselves and teach students. Several prescriptions for excellence are presented in the literature. Examples include the utilization of a developmental, rather than punitive faculty evaluation system (Case, 1971); the employment of a systems approach in institutional planning (Design for Excellence..., 1970); the inclusion of academic faculty in the delivery of community services programs (Herder, 1980; Raines, n.d.); the establishment of campus learning centers where students can study at their own pace (Callahan, 1977); and the abandonment of mastery learning techniques were subjective, blue-book tests are more appropriate (Handleman, 1975). These and other authors propose improvements in budgeting, educational delivery, student learning, student retention, program evaluation, and student literacy. Beyond this, however, the authors convey the assumption that quality is a continual search for improvement. Parnell (1982), for example, traces the roots of quality to an institutional "vitality":

> Is there a search for excellence on your campus? What has your academic senate done about improving teaching? What has your college done about nourishing a caring, teaching, learning environment?... Is there a relentless search for a better way on your campus?

Student Outcomes

Student outcome measures are extremely important quality indices for community college leaders, because community college quality has always

been judged by the subsequent success of graduates in finding employment or in transferring to a four-year institution (Priest, 1980). Student outcomes are the leitmotiv in several documents. Brunner (1963), for example, argues that student vocational follow-up is essential to quality evaluation in career education. Eskow (1968) notes that follow-up studies can help community colleges document their contribution to a more highly educated and trained society, especially since the colleges educate students that would not be accepted at more prestigious institutions. More recently, Koltai (1981) argues that institutional quality depends on the ability of the college to close the gap between the large number of students who say they want to transfer and the small number who actually do. Clearly, student outcomes are widely used measures of community college quality. Evidence of the importance of student outcomes is found in the large number of ERIC documents (264) that detail follow-up studies of community college graduates.

Value-Added Impacts on Students

In comparison to the literature on student outcomes, far less attention has been paid to the value-added approach to quality, that is, quality assessment on the basis of what students learn as a result of the college experience. Monroe (1966) calls for systematic institutional quality control programs that center around documented student learning gains. Such programs, modeled after industrial quality control efforts, would involve routine sampling of entering and leaving students to determine student progress toward specified instructional objectives. Baber (1974), while not providing any specified plan for student evaluation, argues that institutional accountability is determined by student learning. "Accountability," he maintains, "...should mean that the board of trustees, president, and teachers will be held responsible for the performance of ... students"

(p. 4). This conviction is reiterated by Triton College (Renewal for the Eighties, 1980), by the Academic Quality Subcommittee of the Florida State Community College Board ("Report of the Academic Quality Subcommittee...," 1980), and by Mehallis (1980). All three emphasize that quality should be measured in terms of what is learned as a result of attending college; none provides a methodology for measuring that learning. The value-added approach receives a sympathetic, if not exhaustive, hearing in the community college literature.

Curriculum Structure and Emphasis

While community college leaders may agree that student outcomes are a determinant of quality, there is less agreement as to how those outcomes should be attained. To many writers, then, quality is a question of what is included and emphasized in the curriculum. The curriculum approach centers around three main issues: the role of general education and liberal arts in vocational programs; the question of academic standards in college-parallel programs; and the compatibility of the comprehensive curriculum with institutional quality.

The literature reveals a heated debate between those who would include general education and liberal arts studies in vocational programs and those who would not. The latter group includes Halstead (1963) who argues that vocational courses should concentrate on job-related competencies and that students desiring other types of instruction should be "guided toward other programs more suited to their interests, needs, and compatibilities" (p. 51). These sentiments are also expressed by Mahoney and Rasmussen (1979) in response to a 1978 report on the education of police in the United States. The report, entitled The Quality of Police Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978), recommends that two-year college police education programs be

phased out and replaced by baccalaureate programs at four-year institutions, that these baccalaureate programs have a liberal arts emphasis, that the faculty should have liberal arts doctoral degrees, and that no college credit should be granted for how-to courses that train students to fill out reports, fire weapons, and carry out other tasks (McGrath, 1979). Mahoney and Rasmussen argue that police forces need specially trained technicians and, further, that the baccalaureate requirement is simply elitist. "The fact is," they write, "that there are few 'truly exceptional men' or 'Renaissance Men,' or queens, available in the world generally. Most of us are 'toilers in the vineyard'" (p. 4). To many community college leaders, then, quality institutions are those which provide less-able students with training that leads to placement "in careers which are vital but which do not have a lofty position on the American status totem pole" (Priest, 1966, pp. 6-7).

Writers taking the opposite point of view argue that preparation for work alone is inadequate and unjust. Dwyer (1963) insists that quality vocational programs will include general education courses that prepare students for constructive and enlightened citizenship. Cohen (1981) goes beyond this rationale for general education, arguing that no college can maintain quality without exemplars of the liberal arts and that colleges themselves are elitist if they shunt the underprivileged into an educational track that denies access to the liberal arts. It is interesting to note that writers on both sides of the question accuse each other of elitism. The issue of quality at community colleges is caught up in the age-old debate on the relative values of liberal arts education and vocational training.

In the area of transfer education, quality is discussed in terms of the rigor in which open-door colleges screen applicants and adhere to academic standards. Much recent literature, including Baradat (1981), Cohen (1981), Excellence and the Open Door... (1979), and Koltai (1981), reiterates the need to screen students and to assist those who need remediation. These writers carefully eschew the cooling-out function and stress the importance of tracking systems that will, in fact, lead to matriculation in the transfer program and eventual attainment of the baccalaureate. For the sake of quality, educators are taking a get-tough stance. Koltai writes:

> ...our leadership role will involve letting it be known that certain standards will be met..., that reading and writing assignments are to be an integral part of all transfer level courses, that developmental assistance is available for those who need it, and that a vigorous approach to student advisement is not only desirable -- it is expected. (p. 5)

Finally, it should be noted that the comprehensive curriculum has reemerged as an important quality issue. In times of declining enrollment and decreased funding, many writers doubt that community colleges can be all things to all people while at the same time maintaining quality. Richardson and Martens (1981) warn that community colleges simply cannot do everything: "If funding is provided at the 75 percent level, then 75 percent of the need should be met" (p. 54). Morgan (1981), noting the smaller college-age population, asserts that community colleges are better off emphasizing vocational, non-credit community services programs. Cross (1982) comes to the conclusion that, in fact, colleges have been forced to choose individual curricular emphases and that there is no longer a unified "community college movement." Increasingly, quality has become a distasteful matter of selecting a particular curricular emphasis and strengthening it at the expense of other programs.

The curricular aspects of quality are closely related to the student and financial issues discussed earlier. To many writers quality depends on curricular response to increasing numbers of underprepared students and to decreased funding. While the colleges themselves may not be able to do much about the academic preparation of students or decreased funding, the curriculum is under at least some control by administrators and faculty (Cohen, 1981).

Measurements of Community College Quality

In contrast to the large number of articles and documents that discuss quality, relatively few present methodologies that can or have been used to measure quality. The few documents that do present methodologies utilize three measurement techniques: outcome measures, value-added measures, and a "decision-making" approach.

Three documents detail an outcomes approach to quality measurement: Burrill and Chapdelaine (n.d.), Doty (1979), and Ruth (1980). All three present taxonomies of outcomes for institutional evaluation. Burrill and Chapdelaine propose long-range, intermediate-range, and short-range student outcomes for use in evaluating instructional quality at Howard Community College (MD). Short-range outcomes include the percentage of students accomplishing unit and course objectives (which are behaviorally defined). Intermediate- and long-range outcomes (measured by graduate surveys) include employment rate, transfer rate, graduate satisfaction, career success, "position in the community," "quality of life," and "satisfaction with self." Significantly, Burrill and Chapdelaine do not specify how these outcomes are to be measured. The authors do not indicate, for example, what percentage of graduates should be employed one year after graduation.

Doty (1979) and Ruth (1980) advocate the use of more complicated taxonomies that detail (1) outcomes or benefits expected by all college

constituencies, including students, parents, local businesses, and other community groups, and (2) criteria for measuring the degree to which those expectations are met. Under Ruth's taxonomy, for example, an outcome desired by the general public might be the production of better citizens. This benefit, "better citizens," would be categorized as a long-range institutional goal and measured in terms of a specified increase in voter turnout rate or decrease in the crime rate. These taxonomies measure quality within a community-centered framework that includes a host of measures not specified in the student-centered taxonomy presented by Burrill and Chapdelaine.

Three additional studies present a value-added approach to quality measurement: Breen and Freeman (1970), Dumont and others (1981), and Harmon and Morrison (1977). Breen and Freeman compare the employment rates of two groups of vocational students who graduated from Macomb County Community College (MI). While both groups had taken the same vocational courses, one group had participated in a cooperative work experience program; the other had not. Subsequent employment rates for the two groups were controlled (albeit subjectively by the authors) for one input measure: the student's prior job experience. Dumont and others also compared two groups of students: students taking remedial courses at a four-year college and students taking remedial courses at a neighboring community college. The post-program performance of the students was compared after controlling for initial ACT subtest scores. In the third study, Harmon and Morrison compared the cumulative grade point averages of community college transfer students and native students who graduated from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in 1974-75. This study controlled for initial academic aptitude as measured by rank in high school class and SAT scores. While the findings of these studies cannot be generalized to other institutions, it is significant that researchers are beginning to isolate and describe the impact of the community college

on student development.

One final study, conducted by Steuart and Rathburn (1982), takes no particular stance on how quality should be measured. Rather, the researchers surveyed administrators at the Florida community colleges to determine what data the administrators felt were needed to make an assessment of program quality. The survey instrument asked administrators to rank (on one to four scales) the usefulness of 434 pieces of information in making decisions regarding the quality of college programs. The results were utilized to draw up an information profile for program quality "decision-making." Using this profile, program evaluators are required to gather data on need for the program, enrollment, costs, equipment and space utilization, required support services, student characteristics, faculty characteristics, student and faculty program evaluations, external evaluations, quantitative output (such as the number of students completing the program), and other information. In the final analysis, however, this profile tells us little about how community college administrators measure quality, because the study provides no indication of how the data is to be used in making the quality assessment.

The literature review, in summary, produced little quantitative research into the quality of community college education. Clearly, additional research is needed to bring an empirical knowledge to the quality question.

Conclusion

How do community college practitioners and observers measure quality? The answer is complex. First of all, a number of factors are used as indices of quality; these include resources, instructional and management processes, outcomes, value-added impact, and curricular structure and emphasis. Second, different authors use the same quality measure in different ways.

The inclusion of liberal arts instruction in vocational programs is an example; some are for it, some against. Third, there is no consensus as to what the primary focus of the community college should be. As Cross (1982) points out, different colleges have different curricular emphases, and there is no prototypical "quality" community college. Fourth, some quality measures are ill-defined. Parnell (1982), for example, states that institutional "vitality" is a sign of quality. Finally, quality judgments are often made on the basis of subjective, rather than empirical, observations. Indeed, the literature review yielded more discussion than data.

In short, the review disclosed no consensus as to the meaning of quality at community colleges. The search did reveal, however, the many diverse expectations that educators have for the institutions. The quality issue is simply part of a larger unanswered question: What is the role of the community college in higher education?

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